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SOCIOLOGICAL TERMINOLOGY IN ETHNOLOGY¹

By A. A. GOLDENWEISER

IN statistics it is often dangerous and always absurd to express one's conclusions in terms more accurate than is warranted by the variability of the material. Wherever terminological questions arise, a similar difficulty confronts us. Terms less precise than the data hamper understanding, terms more precise than the data are misleading. Classical anthropology prided itself on the definiteness of its terminology. The progress in ethnographic knowledge and in theoretical ethnological thinking has, on the whole, gone hand in hand with decreasing definiteness in terminology.

In the field of sociological concepts, Lewis H. Morgan is perhaps the best representative of the classical school. We find him using the terms gens, phratry, tribe, confederacy, with strictly definite connotations. In his scheme, born of his knowledge of Iroquois society, a gens is characterized by ten functions, each of which must be regarded as symptomatic of a gens: the right of electing its sachem and chiefs; the right of deposing its sachem and chiefs; the obligation not to marry in the gens; mutual rights of inheritance of the property of deceased members; reciprocal obligations of help, defense and redress of injuries; the right of bestowing names upon its members; the right of adopting strangers into the gens; common religious rites; a common burial place; and a council of the gens.

In a similar way he defines the phratry, the tribe, the confederacy. To define a social unit by its functions is, in principle, an admirable procedure. The function constitutes the very essence of a social unit, it denotes what the social unit stands for in the culture of a group; to define social units by their functions would thus be scientifically the most desirable solution of the terminological

¹ Read before the American Anthropological Association at Philadelphia, 1914.

problem, provided the different social units were found to exercise different functions or groups of functions. Morgan supposed this to be the case, but data since accumulated make his position untenable. The functions of social units vary and overlap. Equivalent social units exercise in different tribes different functions; different social units assume in different tribes similar or identical functions. Thus the Iroquois clan shares with the Haida town and the Blackfoot local group the right to elect its chief; it shares the obligation not to marry in the clan with the Tlingit and Haida phratries; the right of inheritance of the property of deceased members is, in other groups, the prerogative of individual families or it may be a purely individual matter, or property and prerogatives may be passed on as a dowry from a man to his daughter to be held or exercised by her son (as is the case among the Kwakiutl); common religious rites are exercised, in different groups, by individual families, maternal families, tribes, religious societies; councils, finally, may be held by members or representatives of families, maternal families, local groups, phratries, tribes, confederacies. Thus the clan shares its functions, as enumerated by Morgan, with many other social, political, and ceremonial units. On the other hand, the functions of clans (or gentes) vary as we pass from one tribe (or group of tribes) to another. The Iroquois clan is a political unit, it practises exogamy, is vaguely associated with locality and ownership of land (particularly cemeteries), but has no ceremonial functions; not indeed in the sense that there are no clan ceremonies—witness to the contrary clan adoption ceremonies, clan mourning ceremonies, etc.—but in the sense that on ceremonial occasions, when many clans participate, the clan is not a ceremonial unit. On the Northwest coast, on the other hand, the clan has no political functions, it is exogamous only in a derivative sense (the phratry being the exogamous unit), but its ceremonial functions are all important and are associated with clan ownership of material and spiritual goods: masks, carvings, ceremonial paraphernalia, but also myths, songs, dances, magical devices. The gens of the Omaha, finally, exercises both political and ceremonial functions. Again, functions which must needs be designated by one term, such

as exogamy, may yet, in particular instances, have special connotations. The Iroquois clan, for the last two hundred years or so, has been an exogamous unit in its own right. The clan of the Tlingit and Haida is exogamous as part of a larger social unit, the phratry. The clan of the Hopi or Zuni, while exogamous in its own right, is a very different group numerically from the Iroquois clan. In one case we deal with social units of which the tribe contains fifty or more and which must needs be very small groups; in the other, the strictly limited number of clans goes with a much larger number of individuals in each clan. That the concrete setting of exogamy as a function of the clan cannot be the same in the two instances, is fairly obvious.¹ The phratry and dual division are no less variable in their functional aspects. The same applies to the individual family, the maternal and paternal family, and the local group, all of which, for instance, together with the phratry, dual division, clan and gens, may exercise ceremonial or political functions, or both.

Thus while we realize more firmly than ever that a social unit is what it does, that the function is the very essence of a social unit, we may no longer attempt to define a social unit by its functions, for a terminology thus constituted would, in view of the prevailing overlapping of functions, make confusion worse confounded.

The question arises: should the terms currently used for the designation of social units be done away with altogether? If a clan is one thing here, another there; if a phratry changes with tribe or culture area; if, moreover, what is characteristic of a clan here, is a phratry trait there, and still elsewhere that of a maternal or individual family, or of a local group, why use the terms clan, phratry, etc. at all? Why not reject these confusing remnants of an overconfident period in anthropological thinking and, moulding our terms after the nature of our data, use either descriptive terms,

¹ For a more detailed treatment of exogamy see the section on "Exogamy and Endogamy" in my "Totemism, an Analytical Study," *Journal of American Folk-Lore*, Vol. XXIII, 1910, pp. 231-251, Dr. R. H. Lowie's "A New Conception of Totemism," *American Anthropologist*, New Series, Vol. XIII, 1911, pp. 192-198, and my "Exogamy and Totemism defined: A Rejoinder," *ibid.*, New Series, Vol. XIII, 1911, pp. 589-592.

such as the specific occasions may suggest, or native terms with the precise native connotations in each particular instance? The first alternative, namely the use of non-technical descriptive terms, would, if adopted, dangerously increase the size and cost of our monographs; moreover, it would necessitate the discontinuance of the use of such non-technical terms with loose and varying connotations; a condition hardly realizable in practice. The alternative adoption of native terminologies, on the other hand, would make treatises on social organization as esoteric as are those on symbolic logic. But there is a more serious reason for preserving the classical terminology while redefining it. The social units designated by the classical terms, as well as the individual family, the maternal and paternal family, and the local group, constitute what one may call natural groups. An illustration will make this clear.

A religious or military society may share a function or functions with a clan or phratry, but the two kinds of social units remain, nevertheless, radically distinct owing to the nature of their social composition. A religious or military society is constituted a social unit by the exercise of its functions; there is no other bond between its members than that of their functional solidarity. A village group, on the other hand, or a clan, or a maternal family, while also determined in their social bearings by their functions, display, in addition, a solidarity of a different order, founded on their social composition as territorial or kinship groups. Of such natural groups three types are distinguishable: the *biological*, the *pseudo-biological*, and the *territorial*.

To the *biological type* belong the individual family, the maternal, and the paternal family. A married couple with their immediate ancestors and progeny constitute a biological unit. This is the nucleus of an individual family, while the household may often include, in addition, the wives and husbands of the younger members of the family. A group of blood-relatives with the additional feature of unilateral descent, constitutes a maternal family (maternal reckoning), or a paternal family (paternal reckoning). The *pseudo-biological type* is represented by the clan and the gens.

A clan or a gens is a group of blood and fictitious relatives, hereditary in the maternal (clan) or paternal (gens) line. In the psychological setting of the clan (or gens) the group of blood relatives is merged in the wider group of fictitious kindred, often bound by the ties of remote (usually mythological) descent from a common ancestor. The phratry, in so far as it is a subdivided clan (or gens) or an association of clans (or gentes) is a derivative of the clan (or gens). The *territorial type* is represented by the different varieties of local groups, beginning with the primitive group occupying a loosely circumscribed district and ending with a village.

In such groups, biological, pseudo-biological, and territorial, man has always lived and still continues to live; for their basic principles are given in the very nature of the relation of the human group to its physical environment and to its own propagation. In the most primitive conditions the territorial or local group is universal. It has long ago been pointed out by Cunow and Starcke, but is not even now sufficiently recognized, that the clan as a definite and hereditary social unit could not possibly have constituted the most ancient form of social grouping. Even if we grant, for a moment, that the individual family was, in the primitive state, unimportant or non-existent, the so-called "clan" could, at that period, have been nothing but a vaguely circumscribed and non-hereditary local horde, a very different thing indeed from what in later stages of social development appears as a clan, a hereditary social unit, independent of locality, which must be a social subdivision of a tribe, for its very existence as a clan depends on and presupposes the existence of other equivalent social units. In later stages of culture the local group persists. Thus, in North America, a vast district is inhabited by tribes such as the Eskimo, Salish, Athapaskan, the tribes of California, and others, who lack clan or gentile systems, but are organized on the basis of the individual family and the local group. Descent in these tribes is indeterminate, the maternal as well as the paternal line being considered in group membership, a condition approaching that found among ourselves. It may be noted that on the North American continent tribes thus organized are, on the whole, more primi-

tive in the other aspects of their cultures than are the tribes organized on the clan and gentile basis. In the tribes of the latter type, again, such as the Iroquois or the Northwest Coast tribes, or the tribes of the Southwest, Southeast, and the Eastern Plains, the local group coexists with the hereditary social units and continues to exercise various functions such as communal ownership of land, communal work, coöperation in minor things of daily life, and so on. At a still later period represented by the tribes found at the dawn of the historical period in Europe, Africa, and Asia, the clan organization, where it has existed, breaks up finally to give room to the village and the town as the henceforth fundamental units of social coëxistence. The tendency of much anthropological and sociological writing has been to underestimate the importance of locality in primitive social organization. In the light of much new evidence, we must now rehabilitate this most ancient and practically universal form of social grouping and give it its due.

Next to the local group, the individual family must be recognized as a social form of probably universal distribution. We may not at this place reproduce the arguments for the existence of the individual family in most primitive conditions. Suffice it to say that psychological and zoölogical considerations make it in the highest degree improbable that in most primitive society the family should have been completely absorbed in the horde. Nor has the hypothesis of promiscuity, referring to the primitive horde, ever been satisfactorily demonstrated. Group marriage, while certainly representing an actual form of the matrimonial relation, is much more plausibly and satisfactorily explained as a specialized development from individual marriage, than as a pristine form antecedent to individual unions.¹ Moreover, while polyandrous and polygynous practices represent a common phenomenon in many times and places, monogamous unions, not necessarily of great permanence, represent the more common form even in polyandrous and polygynous communities.²

¹ Cf. W. Wundt's ingenious hypothesis in *Elemente der Völkerpsychologie*, pp. 165-173.

² Credit must be given to E. Westermarck for a clear realization of this fact.

In tribes of the family-village type, to which, as stated before, a large number of North American tribes belong, the individual family shares with the local group all the important social functions, in so far as they are not exercised by single individuals. In tribes of the clan and gentile type, on the other hand, especially when combined with exogamy—which is usually the case—the solidarity of the individual family is materially impaired; nevertheless it continues to play a not inconspicuous part in home life, especially in the grouping of inmates of houses as well as the more intimate control of individual behavior; nor is it scarcely ever completely deprived of functions of social and ceremonial import. In later stages, with the breaking up of the hereditary kinship groups, the family again becomes an all-important unit, in some respects second in importance only to the local group, in other respects of equal or even greater importance than the latter.

It will be seen from the preceding remarks that the clan and the gens cannot compare in antiquity or universality with either the local group or the individual family. They are foreign to most primitive society, nor do they persist under the socio-economic conditions ushered in with the historic era. Both, nevertheless, present widely diffused and highly typical forms of primitive social organization. It becomes indeed probable, with the constant accumulation of relevant data, that the social, religious, and intellectual manifestations of primitive life which strike us as most divergent from our own, are in part at least conditioned by that peculiar social setting, so foreign to our own culture.¹

Within the clan and the gens we sometimes discover another social formation which has so far been little described or understood. It belongs to the biological type with unilateral descent, and we designate it as the maternal or the paternal family. This form of social unit has, in fact, been carefully studied only in the case of the Five Nation Iroquois, described by Morgan and, since his time, by other investigators. Among the Iroquois all the immediate descendants, male and female, of a woman, the immediate descendants

¹ See my remarks in "The Social Organization of the Indians of North America," *Journal of American Folk-Lore*, Vol. XXVII, 1914, pp. 434-436.

of her female descendants, etc., constitute a maternal family. While theoretically there is no limit to the series, the practical extension of a maternal family seldom goes beyond the fifth or sixth generation. A comparison of a maternal family with a clan discloses a set of equally striking similarities and differences. Like the clan, the maternal family is a hereditary social unit based on maternal descent, but whereas in the clan the kinship is at least in part fictitious, the members of a maternal family are blood relatives. The clan is always designated by a name, the maternal family has no name. The clan, finally, sustains no loss of members who by descent belong to it, for by means of the clan name, membership is automatically sustained from generation to generation. The maternal family, on the other hand, constantly tends to break up. There being no external symbol of family membership and solidarity, memory must take its place, and memory weakens as the generations pass by. Thus a maternal family is always surrounded by a fringe of individuals who are known to be related to it by blood but the degree of whose relationship is no longer remembered. An objective genealogical reconstruction, moreover, would often disclose still another fringe of individuals related by blood to the family even the fact itself of whose relationship remains unknown. The maternal family played a most important part in Iroquois society. While the fifty chiefs of the Iroquois confederacy referred to particular clans they were really hereditary and elective within the limits of maternal families which, with few exceptions, constituted but a part of the clan: The initiative in appointing a candidate for a vacant chieftainship and in deposing a chief whose competence was deemed insufficient, lay with the matron or head woman of his maternal family. In all social, ceremonial and in part religious and military matters the maternal family was the unit of greatest solidarity. That the importance of the maternal family should prove to be a unique Iroquoian phenomenon can hardly be expected;¹ and further research on the American continent and elsewhere will probably lead to a definite inclusion of this

¹ Dr. R. H. Lowie informs me that according to his field notes the so-called "clans" of one at least of the Hopi villages, Walpi, prove to be maternal families.

natural social unit with the other units so far discovered in primitive society.

Brief definitions for the natural units here described may now be formulated.

A *band* is a local group without very clearly defined functions.

A *sept* is a local group which is a subdivision of a larger local group or a local subdivision of a social unit.

A *village* is a local group of fairly definite internal organization and external functions.

A *family* or *individual family* requires no further definition.

A *maternal family* is constituted by a woman, all her immediate descendants, female and male, the immediate descendants of her female descendants, etc. A maternal family, however, never extends, in its entirety, beyond five or at most six generations.

A *paternal family*¹ is constituted by a man, all his immediate descendants, male and female, the immediate descendants of his male descendants, etc. The remark made about the maternal family applies here also.

A *clan* is a subdivision of a tribe constituted by a group of actual and assumed kindred, which has a name and is hereditary in the maternal line.

A *gens* is the same except that it is hereditary in the paternal line.

A *phratry* is a social subdivision of a tribe which is itself further subdivided.

A *dual division* or *moiety* requires no further definition.²

To supplement these terms, descriptive terms will have to be used such as occasion may require.

I should not like to convey the impression that the above definitions are proposed in the assurance that the difficulties referred to

¹ The concept "paternal family" must, for the present, remain an academic one. There is some ground for believing that a grouping of that type, only less fixed than among the Iroquois, existed among the Omaha and some of the Salish tribes of the interior of British Columbia.

² This set of terms and definitions is practically identical with the one submitted in the *Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. XXVII, 1914, p. 434, in the article referred to before.

in the opening paragraphs will thus be overcome; these difficulties reach deeper than terminology, being grounded in the complexity of the data, hence, no terminology can be perfectly satisfactory, in all cases. If, however, the choice is presented between no terminology and an imperfect one, the latter alternative seems the lesser evil, and as such the above terms are here proposed.

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